VA Expands Health Care Eligibility for Veterans under the PACT Act, Native Veterans Encouraged to Check Eligibility for Benefits

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On September 28, 2022, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it will expand and extend eligibility for VA health care for certain Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras pursuant to the Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring Our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act (S. 3373). As a result of the PACT Act, generations of Veterans will now have access to VA health care and benefits they earned and deserve, including American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) Veterans who serve in the military at a higher rate than any other population. For more information on how to apply for health care or learn more about what the PACT Act means for Veterans or their families visit: VA.gov/PACT.

Expansion Details:

Beginning on October 1, 2022, post-9/11 Veterans who did not previously enroll in VA health care will have a 1-year window to enroll if they:

- Served on active duty in a theater of combat operations during a period of war after the Persian Gulf War, or
- Served in combat against a hostile force during a period of hostilities after Nov. 11, 1998, and
- Were discharged or released from active service between Sept. 11, 2001, and Oct. 1, 2013.

The following groups of Veterans will also be eligible for care beginning October 1:

- Gulf War Veterans who served on active duty in a theater of combat operations during a period of war after the Persian Gulf War. This includes Veterans who, in connection with service during such period, received the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Service Specific Expeditionary Medal, Combat Era Specific Expeditionary Medal, Campaign Specific Medal, or any other combat theater award established by federal statute or executive order.
- Vietnam-era Veterans who served in the following locations and time periods : The Republic of Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975 Thailand at any U.S. or Royal Thai base between Jan. 9, 1962, and June 30, 1976; Laos between Dec. 1, 1965, and Sept. 30, 1969; Certain provinces in Cambodia between April 16, 1969, and April 30, 1969; Guam or American Samoa (or their territorial waters) between Jan. 9, 1962, and July 31, 1980 ; Johnston Atoll (or on a ship that called there) between Jan. 1, 1972, and Sept. 30, 1977

Background on the PACT ACT

On August 10, 2022, President Biden signed the bipartisan PACT Act into law, authorizing one of the largest expansions of VA health care and benefits in U.S. history. Before the PACT Act's passage, many Veterans' claims for healthcare services and other benefits were denied by VA because Veteran claimants had difficulty proving a connection between their ailment and their service. The

PACT Act is intended to remove barriers to Veterans getting care, expanding the number of Veterans who are eligible for care and streamlining the process for proving a service connection for certain conditions related to toxic exposure.

The PACT Act will bring the following changes:

- Expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for Veterans with toxic exposures and Veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras
- Adds more than 20 new presumptive conditions for burn pits and other toxic exposures
- Adds more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation
- Requires VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every Veteran enrolled in VA health care
- Helps VA improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures

AI/AN Veterans

There is an urgent need to ensure that all AI/AN Veterans have access to the benefits they earned through their service. According to a 2020 VA Report, AI/AN Veterans served in the Pre-9/11 period at a higher percentage than other Veteran populations. Despite a distinguished record of service, VA's statistics also show that AI/AN Veterans were more likely to be unemployed, were more likely to lack health insurance, and were more likely to have a service-connected disability when compared to Veterans of other races. In addition, in Fiscal Year 2017, AI/AN Veterans used Veterans Benefits Administration benefits or services at a lower percentage than veterans of other races.

NCUIH and the VA

The National Council of Urban Indian Health (NCUIH) has continued to advocate on behalf of AI/AN veterans living in urban areas and to strengthen its partnership with VA. Thanks to NCUIH's work with VA, urban Indian organizations (UIOs) are now eligible to enter the VA Indian Health Service/Tribal Health Program (THP)/UIO Reimbursement Agreements Program, which provides VA reimbursement to IHS, THP, and UIO health facilities for services provided to eligible AI/AN Veterans. In October 2021, Sonya Tetnowski, President of NCUIH and CEO of the Indian Health Center of Santa Clara Valley, Army Veteran, and member of the Makah Tribe was appointed to the VA's first-ever Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs to represent the voice of urban Indians.